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Maybe the September trip to Costa Rica should be called old times. The reading and talking and sitting up late remembering all those funny guys we knew in college revived the past.

My friends were certainly old times. His grandmother taught my maternal grandfather in grade school in Sherwood, Texas, in the 1880s. Our families shared business and social connections all through this century in San Angelo, and still do. I often forget and call his relatives Uncle Cy and Uncle Arthur like they are my kinfolk, too.

Nothing definite has been discussed, but I always thought as perilous as this old life is, and as generous as he and his wife are, they'd probably look after me in my winter years. In fact, I addressed the matter in a paragraph of a letter I wrote them in the summer:

"As if the treatment of us old folks in the United States, especially old ranchers, hadn't degenerated enough, the U.S. Game and Fish Commission released gray wolves on the White Sands Reserve in New Mexico last winter. Trucker ran over one on the east side of El Paso a short time later heading in the direction of the ranch. Winters seem to come earlier and get colder and last longer in the shortgrass country, old friend. But now it won't be long until the wolf packs howl in the back yard. I still have the .32 Winchester our Cousin Brookie gave me. I reckon I'll take a scalp or

two before the wolves tear the flesh from my old bones, but it looks bad with the panthers already here and the wolf packs on the way. Hoping this finds you safe and sound in paradise with your ever loving wife, Monte."

However, I was too polite to mention staying long term on my visit. Out walking, sometimes I'd take a sight on a stray cat or loose dog with my walking cane, like I was practicing aiming at a wolf. You have to be careful in those exclusive Costa Rican neighborhoods. Displaced dictators on non-grata leave from raiding a national treasury and scoundrely bankers hiding out from nosy process servers tend to be nervous enough without a strange gringo aiming his stick at their watchdogs, or swinging on a crow for a wing shot.

It was hard to conceal my enthusiasm for their lifestyle. The agenda was always a surprise – a pleasant surprise. Like after a morning walk around the country club golf course, we stepped out of the clubhouse foyer and were picked up by a British chap in a four-wheel drive vehicle to motor over on the Pacific Coast for the day. One minute a lady is fetching tea from the club's bar, the next we are roaring off, chauffeured by a family friend to see the coast land.

True for all those English guys, he clipped off his words and finished sentences so much faster than we do in Texas, he was hard to understand. His present vocation is

growing coffee. "Green beans bring 80 cents a pound," he told us. "Beans shrink 20 percent a pound in the roasting. Coffee people are terribly displeased of this price, but I think it's fair market."

I kept amending my script. Quite a bit needed to be discussed about the Costa Rican dairy farmers using black bulls to marble up the steaks in the markets, but I was in poor form. The evening before our walk coincided with exercising the guard dogs in the neighborhood. All the rich people keep from three to a half-dozen enormous dogs to lurch against the iron gates of the high-walled estates to scare off bandits. Every time I meet a black brute of a Rottweiler straining on a leash, or a crumpled-eared Doberman swaying on his lead, dragging a 90 pound kid down the street, a spastic stuttering and an eye tic hit me worse than the vibration of the trans-Atlantic cable in a bad storm.

This Brit had served in His Majesty's army in the same regiments as his father. By heart, he knew the menu of the officers' mess on a Sunday. Part of his family were expatriated colonials from African revolutions. He'd just come from Montreal after consoling an old auntie late of Rhodesia, who felt stranded among the French Canadians because their cabs were too dirty to ride in and the subways too democratic for her tastes. And what really shut me up

was the announcement that he judged Rottweiler shows on the weekends.

The first break was on a high bridge to glass in two big crocodiles lying on a mud bank. Never lowering my binoculars, I related the time a sand crocodile swallowed a wild boar head first in Borneo close to camp. "The boar screamed as the huge reptile's teeth tore into the bristle of his massive head," I told him, "but before the hog expired from the croc's crushing jaws, his razor tusks ripped the sides of the crocodile's cheeks clear to his eyeballs, leaving the monster no choice but to eat a straight diet of water lilies the rest of his life."

At bedtime, my friend came by the room. In his gentle manner said: "Now, Monte, down here we don't tell the kind of stories you are used to telling back home."